

**UNIT 7 JEREMIAH AND THE PROPHETIC MOVEMENT LESSON 6****"PREACHER'S STRUGGLES"****STUDY PASSAGE: Jeremiah 11-20**

In Lesson 5 we examined the methods and tactics employed by the prophets in the communication of their message. Now we will notice some of the personal trials that these messengers were forced to endure in the fulfilment of their ministries. A preacher's task in proclaiming God's Word involves his total personality and life. Consequently, he faces struggles and difficulties from every direction, both inwardly and outwardly, and he is very conscious in a personal way of the resistance of men's hearts to the ways of God.

H. Ellison in, *The Message of the Old Testament* p.61, summarizes Jeremiah's struggles: "During the first five years of Jehoiakim's reign, we see Jeremiah suffering blow after blow. First the people rejected his message and sought his life (26:119). Then the men of his home village, Anathoth, instigated by his own family, tried to murder him (11:18-12:6). We find him bitterly reviled and maligned (15:10-18), unmarried and alone (16:1-4), his position aggravated by God's prohibition against his joining in the joys and sorrows of his neighbours (16:5-9). Perhaps his biggest shock was to find the religious leaders listening to his message merely to find a handle for attacking him (18:18-23). Then he had the experience of being flogged and put in the stocks (20:2) and being refused entrance to the Temple (36:5 R.S.V.). To crown it all, he had to go underground to escape Jehoiakim's fury (36:26). Jeremiah almost collapsed, but not quite (20:7-18). As the clouds of retribution gathered around Jehoiakim, Jeremiah was back at his post (ch.35), which he did not forsake in the face of starvation, imprisonment and slow death in the dry cistern (38:1-13). Where others would have sought a few years in retirement, he clung to his people and went with them to Egypt, where he presumably died".

1. WHAT PERSONAL TRIALS CONFRONTED JEREMIAH?

Throughout these chapters (11-20) of Jeremiah, we have a very personal glimpse of the man himself. His personality, moods and conflicts are portrayed in frank honesty in passages that have become known as Jeremiah's "confessions" (8:18-9:3; 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). It is here that we see the soul of a man struggling to obey the Word of God against the pressures of human weakness and sin.

Jeremiah 8:18-9:3: In this deeply moving passage, the prophet reflects in his own heart the anguish of God, as he shares His people's grief (8:18-22) and grieves over their sin (9:1-6).

Jeremiah naively fails to suspect a dangerous conspiracy (11:19-21).

In chapter 12:1-4, Jeremiah faces disturbing intellectual questions - the age-long problem of the success of the wicked.

Jeremiah is among the boldest of any generation who have stood up in their suffering and interrogated God on the issue of the success of the godless and impious. Anger (v.3, 4) burns within



him against the murderous intentions of his enemies at Anathoth. But God is not at the mercy of man's questionings, no matter what the anomalies of human life. Jeremiah receives no direct solution to his problem, but rather the command to get ready for a yet greater tax on his faith and courage.

In chapter 17: 5-7 and 18:19-23, we see that Jeremiah became very vindictive at times, "bring disgrace on them, fill them with terror." "Let their children starve to death; let them be killed in war". His role as prophet put him under tremendous pressure. His mood fluctuates between confident faith (20:11-13) and utter misery (20:14-18).

However, Jeremiah's confidence in the promises, presence and protection of God, enabled him to endure these trials (15:19-21; 20:11, 12) and God's message, "burning like a fire" within him, was the motivation to keep him going in the face of all opposition (20:9).

Our sympathy no doubt reaches out towards a man who endures such opposition and such inward struggle of emotional and spiritual conflicts, and who yet remains true to God's Word. By nature, Jeremiah was a timid and sensitive person. Yet his career was marked by conflict. He was threatened, hounded, persecuted, humiliated. But for all this, he remained firm to his task. In daring sermons and powerful preaching, he confronted the people with the claims of God. Resisting his own inward impulses to flee, and bravely facing hostile antagonists, Jeremiah faithfully pressed home his unpopular message of judgment. On the one hand he appears a pathetically tragic figure, but at the same time, he inspires our respect and admiration.

WHAT HARDSHIPS WERE ENCOUNTERED BY OTHER PROPHETS?

Though not as fully portrayed as Jeremiah's, (the experiences of) other prophets had their moments of hardship and trial also.

AMOS.

Amos impresses you as having a tougher disposition than Jeremiah, but then he wasn't preaching at his friends and, relatives, either. Though not much is recorded of Amos' personal activities, there is one historical incident mentioned, (in Amos 7:10-17), and this throws light on some of his difficulties.

HOSEA.

For Hosea, the prophetic ministry was one of deep personal tragedy and suffering. Hosea boldly pictured Israel's faithlessness in terms of his own disastrous marriage to an unfaithful woman. Just as his wife, Gomer, turned out to be unfaithful to him, so God's people had deserted the Lord. For this, judgement would fall on Israel. Yet in the end, God's constant love for His people would prevail and he would win the nation back to himself and restore the relationship.



ISAIAH.

The prophet Isaiah's task was more than an occupation, it involved his entire life. It affected his family in that his two sons had names that were constant reminders of his teaching. The first was Shear Jashub (7:3) meaning "a remnant shall return" and the second son's name meant "speed, spoil, hasten, plunder" or NRSV footnote "The spoil speeds, the prey hastens" (8:3). Isaiah also faced the personal embarrassment of being naked and barefoot for 3 years (20:2,3).

He too, on occasions, faced the failure of not being able to get his message across, despite his eloquence and authority. From time to time, he gave advice to the national leaders on political matters (cf. 7:3, 4) but his counsel was not always heeded (8:6, 11-13). The drunken aristocracy of Jerusalem scorned his attempts to teach them God's ways, calling it childish (28:9,10). Isaiah's call by God had prepared him for such rejection. In 6:9,10 God had told him he was being sent to a nation deaf and blind to his entreaties. A nation that would be destroyed and taken captive (6:11,12).

EZEKIEL.

Ezekiel's methods were often given to the dramatic (e.g., 4:1; 5:1; 12:3,18). How taxing these demands must have been to every part of his nature and personality.

JONAH.

Jonah was a man who needed constant persuasion to keep him to his task (1:3). His ministry was also a personal spiritual pilgrimage portrayed very realistically and vividly. He endured turmoil (2:1, 2, 4, 7). Jonah's personal feelings and desires conflicted greatly with his spiritual duty.

It was never easy to be a preacher of God's Word. The prophets were only men. Called and anointed by God yes, but still only men. Men who became very much aware of their human nature and frailties when they were required to speak God's Word. Men who suffered because they dared to be God's servants in a hostile world. That is the experience of all who sincerely seek to follow God's Word in loyal obedience.

Isaiah 53 is a moving passage of Scripture, describing the pathway of suffering and humiliation that is to be followed by God's Servant. Ideally, it was fulfilled by the Lord Jesus. Yet it is also the way of all who will follow Him truly.

**QUESTION 1:**

What conspiracy did Jeremiah naively fail to suspect (11:19)? Does the identity of the conspirators indicate why he would be unsuspecting (11:21, cf. 1:1)? How would their identity add to his anguish (12:6; 20:20)? What confidence kept Jeremiah from despairing (11:20)?

QUESTION 2:

How was it his prophetic task, and not just personal characteristics, that was the cause of Jeremiah's embarrassment and ill-treatment (15:15-18; 18:18; 20:7, 8)?

QUESTION 3:

What emotional strain did Jeremiah endure from the social reactions to his message (15:10; 17:14-17)?

QUESTION 4:

Who opposed the ministry of Amos (7:10, 12)? To what authority did this person refer in seeking to quieten Amos (7:10, 13)? What confidence sustained Amos' boldness (7:14, 15)? How did he reply to this attempt to prevent his preaching (7:16, 17)?

QUESTION 5:

What were some of the actions Ezekiel had to perform (4:1; 5:1; 12:3, 18)? What emotional discipline was necessary at his wife's death (24:15-18) What spiritual constraint was upon Ezekiel as he fulfilled his calling (3:16~21)?

QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY:

What confidence enabled Jeremiah to endure all his trials (15:19-21; 20:11, 12)? Does this have any relevance for today? For you personally?